

Pain R.

[Social geography: on action-orientated research.](#)

***Progress in Human Geography* 2003, 27(5), 649-657.**

Copyright:

This is the authors' accepted manuscript of an article that was published in its final definitive form by Sage, 2003.

DOI link to article:

<https://doi.org/10.1191/0309132503ph455pr>

Date deposited:

30/11/2017



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 3.0 Unported License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/)

Social geography: on action oriented research

Rachel Pain

Department of Geography and International Centre for Regional Regeneration

and Development Studies

University of Durham, South Road,

Durham, DH1 3LE, England

rachel.pain@durham.ac.uk

Social geography: on action oriented research

Rachel Pain

It seems that many social and cultural geographers are happy to survey (and 'map') the exclusionary landscape, but rarely do much to change that landscape (Kitchin and Hubbard 1999, 195).

The four years since Kitchin and Hubbard's *Area* editorial on the possibilities for critical action geographies have seen a number of commentaries and conference sessions where ideas, encouragement and examples of action oriented geographies have been aired. This review and the two that follow aim to draw attention to this growing body of research within social geography. Nonetheless, as I discuss in this first review, this presents some difficulties in delimiting, finding and evaluating relevant work. I begin by considering wider recent debates about social geography, and especially its relationships with cultural geography, before suggesting that action oriented research is one area where distinctively social geographies are thriving. The review then maps out the diverse modes of research which fall into this category.

I The fortunes of social geography

The fortunes, shape and future of social geography continue to receive a lot of attention. Even as textbooks chart the subject matter and concerns of the subject (Hamnett 1996; Pain et al 2001; Panelli 2003; Valentine 2001), reviews and commentaries over the past decade have been framed in terms of a crisis of identity for social geography, some forecasting its abandonment or natural death (see Gregson

1995; Jackson 2003; Peach 2002). Much of this analysis has been stimulated by recent critiques of the cultural turn (e.g. Philo 2000; Smith 2000; Cloke 2002). If the cultural turn has not quite become a folk devil, its intellectual and practical limitations, particularly in its apparent neglect of material practices and relevance, are increasingly evident. Where there has been a failure to relate a focus on representation and meaning to material life and social welfare, it is fair to say that the cultural turn has led some away from earlier ideals of a progressive social geography which focuses on social problems and their resolution.

But there is no need for defensiveness on the part of social geographers. While some of the products of the cultural turn never came near to passing the 'so what?' test, others challenged and breathed new life into the traditional interests of social geography. Implicit in critiques such as Peach's (2002) is that social geography should be different, oppositional even, to the 'new' cultural geography, and that it has exclusive terrain which needs protecting from it. Others would see social and cultural geography as having overlapped so far in subject matter and perspectives as to have become one: they were never wholly separate (Jackson 2003), and the same goes for the parallel divides which are often implicitly mapped on (empirical/theoretical, quantitative/qualitative, concrete/abstract, relevant/immaterial). The work of many social geographers straddles some, if not all, of these 'divides'; there are multiple social and cultural geographies and more than one story of their progress in the past decade (Gregson 2003).

Nonetheless, rekindled interest in 'rematerializing' human geography (Jackson 2000; Lees 2002) and critical action research (Fuller and Kitchin forthcoming; Kitchin and

Hubbard 1999) means there is space for a distinctive radical social geography to jump back into the breach. Social geography retains identifiable subject matter, focusing on the geographical aspects of social provision, social reproduction, social identities and inequalities. It is characterised by a continuing role in revealing and challenging injustice, and in interrogating phenomena which might matter to non-academics in ways which make some sense to non-academics (Cater and Jones 1989; Gregson 2003; Pain et al 2001; Peach 2002). I would add to this a growing sense of ‘the social’ articulated recently by Cloke (2002): recognition of the capacity for more moral, caring and politically aware human geographies, and the potential for individual and collective action. These interests, while not exclusive from other parts of the discipline, provide both the imperative and many opportunities for wider engagement and action oriented research.

II The resurgence of action oriented social geographies

These reviews will not be ordered around subject matter, then, but will focus on research which is explicitly concerned with engagement with individuals, groups and communities and action beyond the traditional research encounter. This project has fully re-emerged across human geography in recent years (Kitchin and Hubbard 1999), alongside the critique that critical and radical geographies often fail to go beyond the production of empirical evidence and the development of theory. In choosing this focus, I am not suggesting that these are the only forms of social geographical work that matter, nor that they define the sub-discipline. Nor do I want to identify this as a new or renewed direction, as social geographers have never stopped working in these areas. However, recent years have seen considerable expansion, there are exciting possibilities in the topics, methodologies and theoretical

debates now being tackled, and considerably more sophisticated and reflexive consideration of what is done and how. I hope these reviews will underline that there *is* a critical mass of involvement beyond the academy that is an important if undervalued dimension of academic social geography.

This first review will provide a broad sweep covering modes of action oriented research in social geography. Further reviews will focus on these areas in more depth, rather than other areas in which geographers pursue activism, such as critical teaching (Hay 2001) or challenging institutional practices (Castree 1999) (though all these activities are related politically and practically). The reviews will not be exhaustive but will include what seem good illustrative examples. I am largely limited to the English speaking world, but will include some research carried out in non-western countries, where social geography research is more often categorised by western geographers under ‘development’¹. As well as these usual provisos, there is a glaring paradox in a review of published work which focuses on action oriented research. Relevant details on processes and outcomes are often not included in academic outputs. Much literature now reflects on the possibilities and problems of action oriented research, or intellectualises it; it is less easy to identify practical examples which contribute to geographical knowledge and give some account of how it made a difference. Action and activism are sometimes not mentioned, or downplayed, reflecting researchers’ modesty perhaps, or the schism between the messy everyday practice and politics of research and the polished products which journals demand. And without wanting to leave room for too much optimism, the full extent and nature of impacts outside the academy are unknowable and probably unintended. With all

this in mind, I am quite heavily reliant on others to let me know about relevant work².
A final qualification is that cultural geographers are at it too, if in smaller numbers³.

III Some modes of action oriented social geographies

Action oriented research takes very different forms. Its diversity is increasing as new constraints and opportunities from inside and outside the academy and the discipline of geography have an impact. These include the growing need to look to non-academic bodies for research funding; the increasing pressure to at least claim that research has ‘user relevance’; and theoretical and methodological developments, especially perspectives involving communities and agencies as peers in research. None of these influences can be pigeonholed as simply positive or negative. Until quite recently, debates on action oriented research tended to present the various options in terms of polarities about what type of research matters, and how best to make a difference to ‘real’ people in the ‘real’ world – the relevance debate which re-emerged in the 1990s (Pacione 1999). A key question for social geographers is *who* research is ‘relevant’ to – is it about servicing and informing powerful groups and making policies work better, or about representing and empowering marginalized people? Often framed as ‘top down’ policy research versus ‘bottom up’ grassroots activist research (Blomley 1994; Tickell 1995), there is generally more credibility within critical geography for the former (Lees 1999; Ruddick forthcoming). Despite this divide rumbling on, both approaches are heterogeneous. Below, I briefly consider some relevant themes in activist, participatory and policy research, three modes which are not discrete but often overlap in practice.

Combining activism and research

While many social geographers engage in forms of political activism, recent years have seen a sharp refocusing of interest in activism as an explicit strategy and outcome of research and vice versa. Earlier assumptions that academic endeavours and activism were quite distinctive and separate pursuits which had to be forcefully and problematically combined have been dispelled, and reflection on concrete examples of practice has led writers to confirm the muddying of the objectives and roles of academic/activist noted elsewhere (Routledge 1996). Activism exists on a continuum and is embedded to some extent in all our activity as academics (Ruddick forthcoming). Of her own activism, Ruddick speaks of the difficulties of separating out her intellectual and pragmatic engagement on issues of homelessness, health and planning, as 'activism can become a generative locus of new ways of thinking about the world and being in the world' (Ruddick forthcoming). In their recent manifesto for antiracist geographies, Peake and Kobayashi (2002) also point to the necessity of dispelling the division between theory and activism. Both need to change, within and from the discipline, if the racist heritage and continuing practices of geography are to be challenged. They also suggest that geographers might see the different activities of scholarship, activism and teaching as linked in their pursuit of change.

Recent research demonstrates the diversity of strategies and levels and degrees of engagement in how activism is enacted. Chatterton (2002) gives an account of squatting as a form of protest at the growing dominance of large corporate leisure developers and the consequent squeezing out of services and points of contact for local people in the city centre of Newcastle upon Tyne, England. Here the research account, which documents a broader problem, arises from his own activism and involvement in the protest, reflecting a tradition in social geography of charting social

movements as one strategy to raise wider awareness of issues of inequality (e.g. Chouinard 2001). In so doing, the boundaries between one's own and others' activism are often blurred. Moren-Alegret (2002) acknowledges this in his work on social organisation and international immigration in Barcelona and Lisbon. His involvement in social activism was utilised as a fieldwork strategy which aided him in triangulating and questioning the different positioning of relevant groups. Within health geography, action oriented research is often more directly policy related (see below), but Kearns and Moon (2002, 616) have recently suggested that 'as critical health geography has taken root, a modest blend of activism and academic pursuit has emerged as a viable possibility'. They point to an example of Kearns' own involvement in a Safe Journeys Coalition in an Auckland primary school (Collins and Kearns 2001). Here the conclusions of collaborative research led to recommendations and action to improve children's safety: a more traditional form of action research, but equally important in terms of outcomes.

In Lees' (1999) account of the public reception of her research on the exclusion of young people from urban public spaces in the United States, she raises some difficult questions about exactly what and how academics should contribute to real world problems. One suggestion voiced elsewhere in recent years is for more sharing of skills and strategies for engagement with the world outside, as 'much of the recent writing on activism and the academy has been abstract and has paid limited attention to [...] 'real' attempts' (Lees 1999, 378). This needs to be accompanied by continuing attention to reflexive research practice. Maxey (1999), writing of his experiences of research on sustainability and identity in small Welsh communities, rejects the idea that being self-reflexive goes against the imperative for action to have primacy in

activist research. Instead, he argues that critical scrutiny of the activist researcher's field relations and activities is complementary and important in maximising the potential of the work to contribute to action.

Participatory research

In the growing family of participatory research approaches, the common element is that research is undertaken collaboratively with and for the individuals, groups or communities who are its subject. Participatory approaches present a promising means of making real in practice the stated goals and ideals of critical geography (Kesby 2000). They have been especially popular among social geographers, given the emancipatory potential of providing research space for excluded groups to highlight and act on their own concerns. The approaches also circumvent some of the usual problems of representation, though they are by no means a holy grail, as they raise new difficulties and dilemmas (Monk et al forthcoming; Pain and Francis 2003).

Recent work by Pratt has been particularly successful in realising the ideals of participatory research, in research with Filipino women in domestic service in Vancouver (Pratt in collaboration with Philippine Women Centre 1998, 1999) and with young second generation Filipino immigrants in Canada (Pratt and Filipino-Canadian Youth Alliance 2002). Both of these projects document inequality and oppressive practices, through planning, undertaking and publishing work in collaboration with advocacy organisations. Pratt and Kirby (forthcoming) describe a participatory theatre project staged by a nurses union, which sought to publicise and mobilise concerns about conditions of their work and healthcare delivery. Their interest here is in the power of theatre as a process for changing popular geographies

in itself, and also as a parallel for the process of representation and change which can come about through collaborative human geographical research.

Certain research areas have seen greater development and use of participatory approaches than others. In disability research they are well established outside geography, and Kitchin (1999, 2001) has argued for their greater use among geographers. Writing on morals and ethics in researching disability as a non-disabled researcher (Kitchin 1999), he advocates a partnership approach where subjects are co-researchers, and academics are facilitators, passing on skills, providing technical advice, and providing an outlet to inform policy-makers if appropriate. Chouinard (2000) has made related arguments for more engaged geographies of disability.

It is still the case that social geographical work in ‘developing’ countries is most likely to employ participatory approaches. In Peake and Trotz’s (1999) study of identity and place among Guyanan women, local women contributed to the research design and implementation. Monk et al (forthcoming) give an account of the relations and processes involved in health research which involved collaboration between academics and community agencies at the Mexico-United States border. Kesby (2000) gives a reflective example of the use of a participatory approach in an evaluation of an HIV project in Zimbabwe, and a useful outline of the associated epistemology and the many practical and ethical benefits of carrying out research in this way. Kindon’s (2003) research using participatory video to explore place, identity and social cohesion among a Maaori tribe in Aotearoa/New Zealand is an excellent example of ‘deep’ participation. The researchers and the researched constantly swap

roles, there is reciprocity in the sharing of materials and skills, and the ownership of the videos produced lies wholly in the hands of the tribe.

Policy research

Often seen as the reactionary cousin of activist and participatory research, policy research can also be a viable strategy in critical action research. Social geography has a long interest in and engagement with social policy. Impacts are most likely the more direct the relationship with policy is: for example in work funded by policy-makers or other organised groups, or work in which independent critique of policy is the main objective. Again, the commonly observed bad/good schism between work that is funded by and critical of policy-makers is misplaced; some contract research is highly critical, while policy critiques at the highest level often seem to be left on the shelf.

Social geographers' recent engagements have varied on a continuum from policy critiques from theoretical perspectives, to empirical studies, to work which is more collaborative and/or activist in nature. Much work holds more than one position on that continuum. For example, a number of social geographers have developed critical commentaries on policy which are informed by deeper engagement. In a paper on tenure legalization, Varley (2002) addresses debates of legality/illegality in low income housing in developing countries, assessing governments' attempts to incorporate poor people into formal housing markets with reference to a case study in Mexico. Curtis et al (2002) give a review of theories on the health impacts of urban regeneration which is informed by the views of stakeholders in a London borough experiencing redevelopment. Other recent examples include Gleeson and Kearns (2001) on the philosophies and ethics of community care policy; Kobayashi (1999) on

multiculturalism policy in Canada; Smith et al (2002) on the links between health and housing in Britain; and Gleeson (2002) on urban social exclusion in Australia.

Equally, much empirical work has raised the profile and improved understanding of social problems, as well as actively seeking policy changes at local and national levels. Examples include research on the problems of housing for young people carried out by a team led by Damaris Rose at the Urbanization, Culture and Society research centre of the Institut National de la Recherche Scientifique (Canada Mortgage and Housing Association date?). In Shaw et al's (1999a; 1999b) longstanding and wide-ranging work on inequalities of health and housing in Britain, they apply statistical techniques to official datasets in order to pursue critiques of policy. Klodawsky et al are undertaking longitudinal interviews with homeless people in Ottawa, Canada, funded by the city authority and working with a community advisory committee and an activist group. They also suggest how images and representations of homelessness relate to policies in this area (Klodawsky et al 2002).

It is increasingly common for policy research to use qualitative methods and/or participatory approaches, which are often effective at reflecting the perspectives of those at the sharp end of policies. The work of Cheer et al (2002) on the impact of housing on health for Pacific peoples in Auckland was commissioned by and undertaken for the group concerned, resulting in high quality, in depth research which is well placed to feed into policy agendas. Likewise Moss's community-based research (2002) on social cooperative housing in Canada is placed in the context of state cuts in social housing. The mutual contributions of social geographers to policy

research, and of policy research to informing theoretical debates in social geography, is sizeable though not always highly visible in the usual publication outlets.

IV Conclusion

I end on a much more optimistic note than previous reviews of social geography for this journal. The fears of a decade ago, of a social geography that ‘legitimises the retreat from the empirical world in terms of the crisis of representation’ (Gregson 1993, 529), has not been realised by any stretch. Action oriented social geographies, which not only comment on but get directly involved in seeking solutions to social problems and inequalities, never went away; perhaps they became less fashionable, perhaps they received less exposure. There are strong signs that social geography is remobilising, and despite many pressures which militate against some of these types of academic work, there is a critical mass of engagement beyond the academy. While this review has largely remained in the usual territory of work published in academic journals, subsequent reviews will also consider more closely the other important outputs and outcomes of social geographers’ work.

Notes

¹ Thanks to Kay Anderson for pointing this out.

² Thanks to everyone who has supplied information and references so far. I continue to be very grateful for alerts to examples of work which is relevant to scope of this review, whether and wherever published: please email me at rachel.pain@durham.ac.uk. All help will be acknowledged in my third review.

³ See a forthcoming session on applied cultural geography at the 2003 RGS/IBG annual conference.

References

Blomley, N. 1994: Activism and the academy. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 12, 383-5.

Canada Mortgage and Housing Association date? *Housing Canada's youth*. Socio-economic series 40, CMHA, Ottawa.

Castree, N. 1999: 'Out there?' 'In here'? Domesticating critical geography. *Area* 31, 1, 81-6.

Cater, J. and Jones, T. 1989: *Social geography* London: Edward Arnold.

Chatterton, P. 2002: 'Squatting is still legal, necessary and free': a brief intervention in the corporate city. *Antipode* 34, 1, 1-7.

Cheer, T., Kearns, R. and Murphy, L. 2002: Housing policy, poverty and culture: 'discounting' decisions among Pacific peoples in Auckland, New Zealand. *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy* 20, 497-516.

- Chouinard, V.** 2000: Getting ethical: for inclusive and engaged geographies of disability. *Ethics, Place and Environment* 3, 70-80.
- Chouinard, V.** 2001: Legal peripheries: struggles over disabled Canadians' places in law, society and space. *Canadian Geographer* 45, 1, 187-92.
- Cloke, P.** 2002: Deliver us from evil? Prospects for living ethically and acting politically in human geography. *Progress in Human Geography* 26, 5, 587-604.
- Collins, D. C. A. and Kearns, R. A.** 2001: The safe journeys of an enterprising school: negotiating landscapes of opportunity and risk. *Health and Place* 7, 293-306
- Curtis, S., Cave, B. and Coutts, A.** 2002: Is urban regeneration good for health? Perceptions and theories of the health impacts of urban change. *Environment and Planning C* 20, 517-34.
- Fuller, D. and Kitchin, R.,** editors, forthcoming: *Radical theory, critical praxis: making a difference beyond the academy?* ACME e-book series.
- Gleeson, B.** 2002: *Urban social exclusion in the Australian city*. Paper presented to Social inclusion and the 'new regionalism': the next steps Seminar, University of QLD, October 2002.
- Gleeson, B. and Kearns, R.** 2001: Re-moralising landscapes of care. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 19, 1, 61-80.

Gregson, N. 1993: 'The initiative': delimiting or deconstructing social geography?

Progress in Human Geography 17, 4, 525-30.

Gregson, N. 1995: And now it's all consumption! *Progress in Human Geography* 19,

1, 135-41.

Gregson, N. 2003: Reclaiming 'the social' in social and cultural geography. In

Anderson, K., Domosh, M., Pile, S. and Thrift, N., editors, *Handbook of Cultural*

Geography London: Sage, 43-57.

Hamnett, C., editor, 1996: *Social geography: a reader*. London: Arnold.

Hay, I. 2001: Editorial: critical geography and activism in higher education. *Journal*

of Geography in Higher Education 25, 141-6.

Jackson, P. 2000: Rematerializing social and cultural geography. *Social and Cultural*

Geography 1, 1, 9-14.

Jackson, P. 2003: Introduction: the social in question. In Anderson, K., Domosh, M.,

Pile, S. and Thrift, N., editors, *Handbook of Cultural Geography* London: Sage, 37-

42.

Kearns, R. and Moon, G. 2002: From medical to health geography: novelty, place

and theory after a decade of change. *Progress in Human Geography* 26, 5, 605-25.

Kesby, M. 2000: Participatory diagramming: deploying qualitative methods through an action research epistemology. *Area* 34, 4, 423-435.

Kindon, S. 2003 Participatory video in geographic research: a feminist practice of looking? *Area* 35, 2

Kitchin, R. M. 1999: Ethics and morals in geographical studies of disability. In Proctor, J. and Smith, D., editors, *Geography and ethics: journeys through a moral terrain*, Routledge: London, 223-236.

Kitchin, R. 2001: Using participatory action research approaches in geographical studies of disability: some reflections. *Disability Studies Quarterly* 21, 4, 61-69.

Kitchin, R. M. and Hubbard, P. J. 1999: Editorial: research, action and 'critical' geographies. *Area* 31, 3, 195-8.

Klodawsky, F., Farrell, S. and D'Aubry, T. 2002: Images of homelessness in Ottawa: implications for local politics. *The Canadian Geographer* 46, 2, 126-43.

Kobayashi, A. 1999: Multiculturalism and making a difference: comments on the state of multiculturalism policy in Canada. *Australian-Canadian Studies* 17, 2, 33-42.

Lees, L. 1999: Critical geography and the opening up of the academy: lessons from real life. *Area* 31, 4, 377-83.

Lees, L. 2002: Rematerializing geography: the 'new' urban geography. *Progress in Human Geography* 26, 1, 101-12.

Maxey, I. 1999: Beyond boundaries? Activism, academia, reflexivity and research. *Area* 31, 3, 199-208.

Monk, J., Manning, P. and Denman, C. forthcoming: Working together: feminist perspectives on collaborative research and action. *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Human Geographies*

Moren-Alegret, R. 2002: *Integration and resistance: the relations of social organisations, global capital, governments and international immigration in Spain and Portugal*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Moss, P. 2002: *Social co-ops, housing, and support: exploring models of cooperation*. Paper presented to the Canadian Association for Studies in Cooperation, Toronto, May 2002.

Pacione, M. 1999: Editorial. *Scottish Geographical Magazine* 115, 2, v-xiv.

Pain, R., Barke, M., Gough, J., Fuller, D., MacFarlane, R. and Mowl, G. 2001: *Introducing Social Geographies*. London: Arnold.

Pain, R. and Francis, P. 2003: Reflections on participatory research. *Area* 35, 1.

Panelli, R. 2003: *Social geographies: from difference to action*. London: Sage.

Peach, C. 2002: Social geography: new religions and ethnoburbs – contrasts with cultural geography. *Progress in Human Geography* 26, 2, 252-60.

Peake, L. and Kobayashi, A. 2002: Policies and practices for an antiracist geography at the millennium. *Professional Geographer* 54, 1, 50-61.

Peake, L. and Trotz, A. 1999: *Gender, ethnicity and place: women and identities in Guyana*. London: Routledge.

Philo, P. 2000: More words, more worlds: reflections on the cultural turn and human geography. In Cook, I., Crouch, D., Naylor, S. and Ryan, J., editors, *Cultural turns, geographical turns: perspectives on cultural geography*. Harlow: Prentice Hall, 26-53.

Pratt, G. in collaboration with the Philippine Women Centre 1998: Inscribing domestic work on Filipina bodies. In Nast, H. and Pile, S., editors, *Places through the body* London: Routledge, 283-304.

Pratt, G. in collaboration with the Philippine Women Centre 1999: Is this Canada? Domestic workers' experiences in Vancouver, BC. In Momsen, J. H., editor, *Gender, Migration and Domestic Service*. London: Routledge, 23-42.

Pratt, G. in collaboration with the Filipino-Canadian Youth Alliance 2002: *Between homes: displacement and belonging for second generation Filipino-Canadian youths*. Vancouver Centre of Excellence RIIM Working Paper Series, No 02-13.

Pratt, G. and Kirby, E. forthcoming: Performing nursing: the BC Nurses Union Theatre Project. *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Human Geographies*

Routledge, P. 1996 The third space as critical engagement. *Antipode* 28, 399-419.

Ruddick, S. forthcoming: Activist geographies: building possible worlds. In Cloke, P., Crang, P. and Goodwin, M., editors, *Envisioning human geographies*. London: Arnold.

Shaw, M., Dorling, D., Gordon, D. and Davey Smith, D. 1999: *The widening gap: health inequalities and policy in Britain*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Shaw, M., Dorling, D. and Brimblecombe, N. 1999: Life chances in Britain by housing wealth and for the homeless and vulnerably housed. *Environment and Planning A* 31, 2239-48.

- Smith, N.** 2000: Socializing culture, radicalising the social. *Social and Cultural Geography* 1, 1, 25-8
- Smith, S. J., Easterlow, D., Munro, M. and Turner, K. M.** 2002: Housing as health capital. How health trajectories and housing paths are linked, *Journal of Social Issues*.
- Tickell, A.** 1995: Reflections on 'activism and the academy'. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 13, 235-7.
- Valentine, G.** 2001: *Social geographies: space and society* Harlow: Prentice Hall.
- Varley, A.** 2002: Public or private: debating the meaning of tenure legalization. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 26, 3, 449-61.